

The Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012 (H.R. 1627)

Title 1: Healthcare

Camp Lejeune Veterans and Families

Between 1957-1987, some Marines and their families stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina were exposed to contaminated well water. Veterans and their families who fall ill (or are ill) due to this contamination will be eligible to receive healthcare through VA, for certain medical conditions. For family members, VA will be considered as the “payer of last resort.”

Rural Veterans

To provide better access to VA services for rural veterans, under the bill, VA would waive co-payments for veterans utilizing tele-health care. VA would also evaluate the feasibility of providing reimbursements for travel for veterans wishing to receive care at their nearest [Vet Center](#). Additionally, VA will establish rural health resource centers to better understand the challenges of veterans living in rural regions.

Elderly Veterans

To better care for elderly and severely service-disabled veterans, VA shall enter into contracts with State veteran homes (in all 50 states) to provide nursing home care.

Preventing Sexual Assault

In 2011, [GAO found rampant, unreported sexual assaults](#) occurring at VA facilities, including at mental health care facilities. GAO determined that VA did not have sufficient tracking and reporting protocols in place to ensure assaults were investigated and that veterans and VA employees were protected in such cases. Under the bill, new protections will be mandated to prevent these acts from going unreported and unpunished in the future.

Traumatic Brain Injury

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is one of the signature wounds of Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom. An estimated 250,000 veterans have experienced a TBI in the past decade. Those veterans will now have access to expanded individualized rehabilitation and reintegration services to increase their independence and quality of life.

Improved Access

Veterans do not always visit the same VA facility. Therefore, VA would be required to implement tele-consultation capabilities at its facilities in order to better coordinate health care for veterans. Tele-consultation also aims to increase training for medical residents within VA's healthcare system. In addition, to date, service dogs assisting veterans visiting VA facilities have been banned on VA properties. Under H.R. 1627, that ban would be lifted.

Collections

Funding for many of VA's programs depend on VA's ability to collect fees from providers. Therefore, VA shall establish a system to improve its ability to identify billable claims and make appropriate collections for medical care, as well as extend its authority to collect (through September 30, 2013) copayments from veterans in hospice or nursing home care. VA's authority to recover costs for certain healthcare and services provided to veterans through a third party also will be extended under H.R. 1627.

Title 2: Housing

Adaptive Housing

Due to the influx of wounded warriors, VA's program for specially adapted housing requires it be temporarily expanded. Provisions include eligibility for specially adapted housing assistance grants for veterans with lower limb loss, as well as veterans with vision impairment (by law). The legislation also revises current law to exclude the temporary residence adaptation grant from counting towards the total grant, and improves assistance support, annually adjusted, for disabled veterans living in a family member's home (extended through December 31, 2022).

VA Home Loan Guarantee Program

Under H.R. 1627, as amended, surviving spouses will be eligible for VA home loan guarantees for a period of ten years past the death of the servicemember/veteran/POW (disability rating thresholds apply).

Furthermore, a veteran would be able to count a dependent child, serving in the Armed Forces, to satisfy VA occupancy requirements under the home loan program. Also, VA's adjustable rate mortgage loan guarantee program shall be made permanent (ARM), as will VA's hybrid adjustable rate mortgage loan guarantee (HARM). The fee for VA's Home Loan program will be waived for disabled servicemembers transitioning to veteran status under the legislation.

Enhanced-Use Leases

Renews VA's enhanced-use lease authority (expired December 2011), with increased oversight of the program and limits leases to programs serving homeless veterans only.

Title 3: Homeless

Housing

Too many veterans are falling into homelessness due to today's economy. This legislation authorizes grant funds for new construction of transitional housing for those veterans, as well as matches funds from private and public sources for such housing, with annual reports from VA due to Congress. The bill would also extend fully funded programs aiding homeless veterans, including homeless veterans' reintegration programs and support services for very low-income veteran families, among others.

Care

Many homeless veterans also require specialized care. The legislation instructs VA to provide treatment and rehabilitation services to those veterans, but who are not considered seriously mentally ill. Additionally, male homeless veterans with minor dependents would be classified as special needs veterans to receive grants and per diem payments for services. The legislation also authorizes grant recipients to provide services to the dependent if a veteran is receiving services from the grant

organization. Furthermore, the bill would increase case management and coordination of care for homeless veterans through local and state agencies, tribal organizations, and/or nonprofits as a means to better assist homeless veterans through housing programs.

Title 4: Education

Survivors and Dependents

Under H.R. 1627, survivors and dependents would be allowed to use up to 81 months of VA educational assistance.

Accountability

The legislation also instructs DoD and VA to provide annual reports to Congress (through 2021) on GI Bill programs, specifically how the programs affect recruiting and retention in the military services.

Title 5: Benefits

Streamlining the Disability Claims Process

Over the past 3 years, the VA disability claims backlog has grown exponentially, with more than 900,000 claims now awaiting decisions, 50 percent of which have been pending more than 125 days. Despite repeated promises from VA to break the backlog, it continues to grow. Therefore, when a claim is sent for review to the Board of Veterans' Appeal, the agency of original jurisdiction will waive review of new evidence presented to the board (unless specifically requested). Furthermore, veterans needing assistance with claims, may now assign a signatory on their behalf to sign and file the claim (i.e., those under the age of 18, mentally incompetent, or physically disabled). VA also must provide veterans the option of how to receive claims-related communications, for instance, via electronic communications. Through this legislation, claims processors also must make every attempt to assist veterans in obtaining relevant records, including private medical records (up to two attempts).

Compensation

Veterans filing compensation benefits are inundated with paperwork. Therefore, H.R. 1627 would allow veterans to file jointly for Social Security and Indemnity compensation. Furthermore, claims for certain disability ratings may be retroactively paid when claims are fully completed when submitted to VA; surviving spouses could receive benefits from VA in the month of death, as well as accrued benefits; and couples who both receive disability compensation will receive increased pensions (for those who qualify). In addition, the legislation protects pension benefits for veterans, surviving spouses, and dependents from insurance claims, court awards, settlements, theft, or casualty loss.

Title 6: Memorial, Burial, and Cemeteries

Honoring the Fallen

While ensuring the freedom to protest, but protecting the rights and the honor of the families of the fallen, those wishing to protest military funerals, or at national cemeteries, shall be subject to restrictions, and if violated, protesters shall be punished by criminal or civil action. In addition, servicemembers who die on active-duty shall now be eligible for Presidential Memorial Certificates to honor their service to the Nation.

Arlington National Cemetery

Arlington National Cemetery is the nation's most hallowed ground. Space at Arlington is expected to run out in the mid-2050s. Therefore, reservations for more than one gravesite will no longer be permitted, nor will reservations be honored until time of death, except under extraordinary circumstances. Furthermore, decisions regarding organizations wishing to place monuments honoring the service of a group or individual at Arlington National Cemetery will now be administered by the Secretary of the Army, with Congress retaining the right to overrule the decision within 60 days of notification.

Title 7: Other

Natural Disasters

Natural disasters can strike anytime, anywhere. Veterans in specially adapted housing, receiving subsistence allowances, utilizing independent living services or VA home loans, or in receipt of VA-paid transportation, and which are hindered or destroyed by a natural disaster, shall continue to receive assistance from VA under this legislation.

Expiring Laws

Under H.R. 1627, VA's authority to guaranty timely payment of principal and interest on pools of mortgage loans will be extended, as will VA's authority to collect loan fees and adjustments of maximum home loan guaranty amounts.

Oversight & Transparency

As the second largest federal agency, VA needs to maintain transparency in its operations to veterans and the public. Therefore, under this legislation, VA shall review and revise its skills and competency thresholds for Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) employees to ensure claims for compensation and pensions are not affected by poor performing employees, and that appropriate personnel actions are enforced. Furthermore, VA will be required to submit quarterly reports on VA conferences to Congress.

Fees

VA must protect its federal funding from unnecessary costs. Therefore, VA will only provide reimbursement for ambulance services to and from VA facilities under H.R. 1627. Furthermore, "attributable income" for veterans' reporting to VA shall be clarified to mean the most recent year information is available.

Veterans' Employment

Under the legislation, the Department of Labor will be required to publish data for government contractors, indicating their record of hiring veterans. Additionally, VA will establish a "VetStar" program to recognize companies that have made significant contributions to veteran employment.

SCRA

In the past two years, thousands of servicemembers and their families have been evicted from their homes or foreclosed upon due to errant banking practices. Therefore, under SCRA (the Servicemembers' Civil Relief Act), the period of time that banks will be prohibited from foreclosure/eviction of servicemembers due to late payments will be extended from 9 to 12 months after military service.